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Book Review: *Best Practices in Writing Instruction* (2nd ed.)

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Book review

Graham, S., MacArthur, C. A., & Fitzgerald, J. (Eds.). (2013). *Best Practices in Writing Instruction* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: The Guilford Press | ISBN 978-1462510085

Reviewed by: *Patrick Hales - University of North Carolina | USA*

In a rapidly changing educational landscape, the need for texts that both adapt to reforms as well as make research and best practices accessible to teachers and administrators in the field has become paramount. In the U.S., the adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) has necessitated radical transformations in instruction. A national curriculum, the CCSS asks teachers to vertically align curriculum across grade levels while “horizontally aligning” their teaching with other content areas; preparing more students for college and university is an underlying charge by the CCSS to schools. *Best Practices in Writing Instruction* is a work that I feel achieves the purpose of showing teachers instructional techniques to improve writing instruction through enhancing student critical thinking and emphasizing the differences in disciplinary writing such that transferability of writing skills can be achieved. The authors have compiled in their second edition a grouping of chapters addressing current and traditional issues of writing instruction in K-12 schools. The blend of research surrounding these issues offer instructional implications and practices that make this book a bridge between teachers and researchers in the field of writing instruction. These foundations for the book create a tool that educates and should fit well into a professional education library.



Hales, P. (2014). *Best Practices in Writing Instruction* (2nd ed.) [Book Review]. *Journal of Writing Research*, 6(2), 195-198. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17239/jowr-2014.06.02.5>

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A key purpose for a 2nd edition of this text stems from the prominent adoption of the CCSS as well as a greater focus today on college and career readiness in writing standards than ever before, these were both absent from the 1st edition. Each chapter has been infused with a consideration of CCSS and its implementation into writing instruction at various levels of K-12 education. The chapters concerning the types and purposes of writing (chapters 4-7) take CCSS from a philosophical perspective, examining the necessity of instruction of several types of writing in school.

Conversely, Part I of the text on designing a writing program and Part III on teaching and learning strategies of writing approach the CCSS as a vehicle of changing writing instruction to motivate students to write, assess student writing more affectively, and design writing programs where students learn how to write across contexts. Additionally, and a considered component of the CCSS, a recurring theme for the book is college and career readiness through writing instruction. The authors pose multiple problems and solutions to the issue of college and career readiness of students in research-based and practical terms, addressing a major modern concern for most U.S. educators, policy makers, and school systems.

Identifying Writing Instructional Issues and Misconceptions

The authors and editors of this volume would argue that 1) students have not learned to transfer writing skills across possible contexts in and out of schools and 2) an emphasis on disciplinary writing in all classrooms could help to improve versatility of student writing and student comprehension of the written form. From the very first chapter about designing an effective school writing program, there is an emphasis placed on how little disciplinary writing occurs in schools. Disciplinary writing refers to context specific writing for a content area. The editors and authors seem to believe there are basic tenets of “good writing,” but they are certain that students have been lacking and now require explicit instruction in how to write for certain purposes. This text supports this argument effectively with research and adds specific strategies and exemplars from the field to give examples of how to accomplish this. Each chapter attacks this issue from a different angle; all grade levels are represented and multiple disciplines are discussed specifically. Identifying it as a prevalent issue from Chapter 1, the editors seem to have pushed for a focus on improving student transfer of writing skills across most parts and chapters. This serves to create continuity and impresses upon the reader the significance of knowing students and their goals.

Through research and examples, the first chapter makes evident a common misconception of teachers of writing. The authors posit that “writing to learn,” learning a concept through writing about it, and “learning to write,” the process of coming to understand how to write for specific contexts, are two separate constructs of instruction, which teachers confuse frequently. Toward the end of clarifying this confusion, chapters throughout the text concentrate explicitly on best practices that support “writing to learn” or “learning to write.” Part I of the text emphasizes this as an essential understanding of the design of a writing program. This section provides

example lessons and classroom strategies which showcase “learning to write” as a more rare endeavor in classrooms. Part II focuses mainly on “writing to learn” and disciplinary writing whereas Part III hones in on best practices for explicit teaching of students how to write. Treating these components of writing instruction as separate can support teachers in making instructional decisions to develop students as versatile writers.

Two chapters of the text are purely focused on motivation and assessment in students as it pertains to writing instruction. This is of particular import as student disenfranchisement to writing is particularly low generally speaking. The authors of these chapters provide detailed cases for examination as well as strategies for improving student motivation to write and assessing writing in a meaningful, goal-oriented manner. The chapter on motivation identifies some key issues in student disengagement in writing instruction, focusing on the value that students and teachers place on writing and how to emphasize that through various means. This approach seems effective, as it does not suggest a cure-all strategy for increasing motivation but rather a paradigm shift for all parties. The chapter on assessment refers heavily to CCSS. Additionally, the suggested improvements to writing assessment call for viewing writing as a performance task that occurs within context, over time, not as an isolated event. Through several classroom examples, the authors of this chapter provide a portrait of writing assessment that delineates between “writing to learn” and “learning to write” and recognizes student development of writing skills. The underlying implications of these two chapters is that teachers must do more than simply add new strategies of instruction by adopting new and flexible ways of thinking about teaching and learning.

Considering Special Populations

The last section of the text is devoted to special populations; these two chapters provide perspectives and practices for promoting writing development with English Language Learners (ELLs) and students with learning disabilities. The authors provide specific examples and strategies for working with English Language Learners at the elementary, middle, and secondary levels. While not comprehensive of all possible strategies, this chapter does promote a consideration of practices that promote ELL engagement and strategy development for writing. The chapter concerning students with learning disabilities approaches writing from a response-to-intervention framework; this means that in evaluating students with learning disabilities, their responses to educational, research-based interventions are a part of the process. This chapter draws upon earlier sections of the book about assessing writing to further the discussion. In considering writing as a part of response-to-intervention, these authors provided a framework for a detailed assessment of student writing which provides feedback for students and teachers. The process is clear, adaptive, student-centered, and focuses on the development of self-regulation strategies for students. This chapter notes that the notions of writing assessment considered through this RTI framework can be applied to writing assessment with all students to assist in developing more adaptive writing

strategies. This volume does not isolate special populations in its considerations of their needs for writing instruction; rather, it identifies needs, develops strategies for addressing those needs, and shows how to implement them in a way that benefits all learners.

Analyzing Successes and Shortcomings

Though the editors did include a section of the book on specialized populations, more could have been done to consider culture and disenfranchisement of certain student populations toward writing. The need for addressing writing instruction with English Language Learners and special needs students is great; however, when considering “special populations” in a school, there are a number which could use a research focus as it pertains to writing instruction and practice. Teaching and learning is a socially and politically situated act which is affected by the cultures, beliefs, and orientations of the teachers and learners. This means that learning and instruction should be context-specific and individualized. I believe a consideration of this sort of thinking into best practices is missing in this text and would add a great deal to the discussion of writing instruction with special populations.

This text provides a great deal of research, examples, and strategies to improve writing instruction for teachers. The inclusion of CCSS and focus on 21st century writing skills makes this a highly relevant volume. The authors and editors recognize and reiterate that, though this is a volume on best practices, more than simple strategy implementation is necessary to truly make headway toward effective writing instruction; paradigm shifts toward better motivation, more relevant assessment, and supporting student transference of writing skills across contexts are central to the purposes of this book. That is where this volume rises above many of its peers as it is not simply a repository, but it acts as a guide for making necessary improvements to the writing instruction U.S. students are receiving. This text represents exhaustive research and practice of writing instruction that improves student performance. Both teachers and researchers alike will find use in this volume.